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World Chronicle

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GUEST: **Billie Miller**
Chairperson of the NGO Planning Committee for the International Conference on Population and Development

JOURNALISTS: Bhaskar Menon, Times of India
Emiko Tate, NHK, Japan Broadcasting Corporation

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NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

BILLIE MILLER, Chairperson of the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Planning Committee for the International Conference on Population and Development, reflects on the NGO participation in the preparation for the Conference. More than 300 NGOs with interests in population, environmental protection, human rights, development and health will attend the Conference. NGOs are working with governments on matters relating to population and development to shape the agenda on sustainable development programmes. NGOs will ask the Conference to focus on social, economic and educational programmes for women as important elements for family planning and development. Abortion is one of the controversial issues the Conference will face.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

The rapid growth of the world's population has put increasingly severe stress on the life-supporting capacity of our planet. With human numbers growing by more than 90 million a year, communities are looking for a sustainable path to development.

To address these issues, the world community has decided to convene an International Conference on Population and Development, or ICPD, in Cairo in September this year. Meanwhile, around the world, there's growing discussion of the relationship between population and development not only in government circles, but also in grassroots movements and non-governmental organizations, or NGOs.

Our guest today is in a unique position to discuss the role NGOs are playing in the preparations for the Cairo Conference. She's Billie Miller, Chairperson of the NGO Planning Committee for the International Conference on Population and Development. Joining me to talk to Ms. Miller are Bhaskar Menon of the Times of India and Emiko Tate of NHK-Japan Broadcasting Corporation. Ms. Miller, welcome to World Chronicle.

Ms. Miller, the Conference, I take it, will come up with a plan of action that governments are then expected to implement. What is the role of the NGO community in the Conference? Are you going to be there essentially as lobbyists lobbying government delegations, or will you be making a precise contribution of your own to what ultimately may be the declaration and plan of action?

MILLER: I think both will happen. We're actively encouraging governments to include, wherever possible, some NGO participation on their delegations. So we are hoping that there will be a number of NGO people in the intergovernmental conference. And then, of course, what we are calling "NGO Forum 94," which will be the exclusively NGO forum.

LITTLEJOHNS: That is sort of a conference within --

MILLER: Parallel, yes, this will run parallel, concurrently with the intergovernmental meeting. It's about ten minutes' walk away, so we're expecting a great deal of interaction between government delegates and NGO people.

LITTLEJOHNS: About how many non-governmental organizations actually are going to be involved?

MILLER: Well, there are at least 300 already registered with us -- organizations. We imagine that -- maybe six, seven thousand people.

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LITTLEJOHNS: Is there going to be a pretty good mix between the so-called developed and developing worlds?

MILLER: We're hoping so. There are a number of constituencies of interest. There will be populationists, of course; environmentalists in large numbers are registering with us; a number of women's groups as well. So there's quite a broad spectrum of interest.

MENON: Do you have a coherent agenda? Do you have something that you could say these are the main points on which NGOs will be interacting?

MILLER: Well, NGOs, I think, will follow what's being called the "Cairo Document".

MENON: And, which is what? What is that document?

MILLER: This is the document which is evolving out of the Preparatory Committee meetings, the third of which is going to be held in April here at the UN, and this document the end document which will go forward to Cairo.

MENON: Right, but when you say that it will -- the NGOs fill focus on that, do they have their own agenda to put forward on this?

MILLER: Oh, yes. All of those various constituencies of interest very much have their own agenda. I mean the women's groupings have their own perspective, their own emphases. The environmentalists have their own as well. And there are several bodies of opinion even within the populationist group.

TATE: What will be the main debates or issues at this next conference?

MILLER: I think we are going to spend quite a bit of time discussing sexual reproductive health. The way in which the environment will impact one on the other -- that's going to be a continuing discussion out of Cairo. In fact, I think Cairo is going to be part of a continuum that started even before Rio, and moves on through Cairo into Beijing. There are a number of --

LITTLEJOHNS: What's the connection with Beijing? What's happening in Beijing?

MILLER: Well, the Women's Conference in 1995 in Beijing.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ah, oh, I see.

MILLER: Yes. Every decade there is a population conference and a women's conference, and now the environmental conference.

LITTLEJOHNS: So this will be in a way a sort of preparation for the Women's Conference or --

MILLER: In a manner of speaking, yes. There are many issues which are common to both groups, and some of the major issues out of Cairo will go forward to Beijing; reproductive health will be one.

MENON: What do you mean when you say reproductive health? What exactly are you talking about?

MILLER: Well, as family planners now -- and I speak for myself -- we look at the whole question of family planning in a larger perspective than we used to do 20, 25 years ago, and now we speak of reproductive health which encompasses a whole host of other areas beyond family planning.

MENON: Like what? Like...

MILLER: Well, it would encompass what happens to adolescents.

MENON: Nutrition for mothers?

MILLER: Quite apart -- yes, quite apart from the usual subject of adolescent...

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean teenage mothers, the problem of teenage motherhood?

MILLER: Yes, yes, it will go beyond adolescent fertility. And then, there are so many other things, sexually transmitted diseases, of which AIDS is one; so AIDS will fit into there as well -- that sort of thing.

TATE: Beyond raising awareness in this Conference, what do you expect to be an outcome of this Conference? Are you expecting some kind of commitment from governments for X amount of dollars, or is there something concrete that you want out of this new program that will be established?

MILLER: Yes. There is a great deal of un-met need in the world still: lack of access to services, particularly in the developing world; quality of services in both the developed and the developing world. Even in the United States of America there is a great deal that Planned Parenthood is doing to ameliorate the lack of quality, which is very uneven across the country.

TATE: But are you expecting certain governments to give a commitment? Or --

MILLER: Oh, yes, we hope that some governments will give commitments.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean a financial commitment?

MILLER: Financial commitments, commitments in terms of programs, commitments in terms of what we're setting up. The Secretary-General of the Conference, Dr. Nafis Sadik, has suggested that perhaps the year 2015 might be a deadline for the realization of a number of goals which the Conference will outline.

MENON: Can I ask you, how did you personally get involved in an issue like this? I mean how does a person get to be chairman of the coordinating committee for a conference like this? How did you get there?

MILLER: I've been involved in family planning and population matters for a very long time, starting with the local Family Planning Association in Barbados. There was a time when I was a Minister of Health in Barbados, and during that time one of the more important things that I did, I think, was to introduce into our Parliament a medical termination of pregnancy bill, which is the only one of its kind that you will find in the Caribbean, even today, ten years later.

MENON: Why is that? The other Caribbean countries are not -- don't have abortion policies?

MILLER: Some are struggling. Some are struggling now to put a policy on their statute books. It's no easier in the Caribbean than it is in North America or South America, or anywhere else for that matter. And then, apart from that, I'm in my second term as President of the International Planned Parenthood Federation's Western Hemisphere Region, and I sit on a UN advisory panel to do with women's affairs out of UNFPA, and sometimes I do things for --

MENON: I see. So it's kind of natural for you to fall into this.

MILLER: Yes! For the World Health Organization I do things, and so I was invited to chair this, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: This question of pregnancy termination, as you delicately put it, is this going to be a major cause of controversy at the Conference?

MILLER: Yes. There are going to be many controversial issues at Cairo, and I am perfectly sure that abortion is going to be one of them.

LITTLEJOHNS: And you expect the United States to take the same rather difficult position that it took at the conference in Mexico City on the same subject?

MILLER: Absolutely not.

LITTLEJOHNS: No? Because of the change in government?

MILLER: Absolutely. Absolutely. This administration, to the eternal credit of President Clinton, has reversed what we call the Mexico City policy, which has nothing to do with the Mexican government or the Mexican people. It really was a United States policy statement made at the time of the last ICPD in Mexico City in 1984. And it was very pleasing to us in the population field that one of the very first things that the President did was to reverse that policy. So we hope that that will not ever happen again.

TATE: I want to ask about the family planning measures. In what regions or what countries have the family planning measures been the most successful, and why?

MILLER: Certainly in the Caribbean where I come from, in my own country, Barbados is used as a model throughout the developing world, and even in some developed countries, for the success that you can achieve with family planning. We have halved our birth rate in 25 years. We have a negligible maternal mortality rate. We have an infant mortality rate which is as good and sometimes better than what you will find in many developed countries.

MENON: What's the literacy rate?

MILLER: Our literacy rate, we like to boast, is 99.9 per cent.

MENON: That's very good.

TATE: So is that one of the major reasons you attribute the success --

MILLER: Well, that had a great deal to do with it. It was part of the whole development process. What happened in Barbados doesn't happen by itself, because you have a family planning policy. Barbados was the first country after India in the early 1950s where the government openly endorsed and supported family planning as a policy.

MENON: The reason I asked about literacy is, of course, the direct correlation between the education of women and the success of family planning --

MILLER: Absolutely. Absolutely.

MENON: -- which is probably also why the UN tacked on the word "development" to this Conference, "population and development".

LITTLEJOHNS: That seems to be the practice these days, to add "development" to every conference.

MILLER: Well, development was critical, because what happened in the social sectors in many developing countries, including my own, in terms of the provision of health services, particularly primary healthcare, and the provision of educational services -- primary, secondary and tertiary -- is freely available to every Barbadian child.

MENON: But to what extent are the development aspects going to be addressed at the Conference? Because almost everything I hear about the Conference is that it's going to be family planning. Now, this is a debate that goes back a long way. You cannot really -- family planning really cannot work if the context of development is not also there. So to what extent do you expect that?

MILLER: I think that what will happen at Cairo, which will make it different from Mexico, Bucharest, is that...

LITTLEJOHNS: They had a conference in Bucharest as well?

MILLER: The first one in 1974, the first Population Conference. And in those days, we tended to separate, like you say, population out and family planning out, and we dealt with that as an issue. And not so much -- the linkage with development was not so much our focus. I think that this is what will be different about Cairo, that we will finally, absolutely -- this is the last chance in this century to do it -- we must somehow establish for the world now this linkage between population and development and show people the ways in which population has serious implications for the environment. I think Rio did that if nothing else. The way that it has implications for all of the other developmental issues: for education, education places, the number of seats upon which children may sit to go to school, the number of hospital beds and other implications for health; implications for jobs.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Billie Miller, Chairperson of the NGO Planning Committee for the International Conference on Population and Development.

TATE: I wanted to ask, you were talking about in your country there are higher levels of education which correspond to lower birthrates. What do you, or the NGOs that you represent, suggest for removing some of the cultural barriers for women attaining higher levels of education?

MILLER: Well, the women's groupings are very vocal on this: education for girls in particular -- not to the exclusion of education for boys of course -- but this linkage is very well established, proven time and time again. And this is going to be high on the agenda, I think, too, for discussion in Cairo among NGOs and at the intergovernmental meeting as well.

TATE: What are some of the discussions about how to kind of help remove some of those barriers?

MILLER: The provision of school places for girls. In some parts of the developing world, this is easier said than done. Because, as you've indicated, there are religious, cultural barriers, economic barriers as well. And this is why it is important to put population into that wider developmental process perspective. I think that it is well enough established now that excessively large populations do tend to be a drag on the development process. And there are so many, you know, examples of that.

MENON: May I ask you, one of the things that's been a factor in the UN's dealings with NGOs is that most of them tend to come from developed countries, and even the ones that do exist in developing countries are usually dependent for their funding on either the governments or northern NGOs. To what extent does this distort the NGO contribution to any world plan of action?

MILLER: Well, we live now, we're told, more in a global village than anything else. Many of the NGOs are coming from countries where there's structural adjustment or some other such program under way -- they're at the northern end of things, you know, so many countries in the north are now in recession of one kind or another. So there is, perhaps, more in common in this way than you might think. I think you are going to see a continuing dependence, I'm afraid, of southern NGOs for funding on northern --

MENON: Is that something that your coordinating committee deals with, funding for NGOs coming to the Conference?

MILLER: No, not at all. This planning committee, this steering committee as we call it -- it really is a microcosm of the planning committee for the ICPD -- is almos exclusively a facilitating committee. It's our main job to put facilities on the ground so that NGOs can have the kind of experience, the kind of exchange that they want to have in Cairo. We need to make sure that people will have good access to interpretation, to documentation, to translation. We have to make sure that there are meeting places available which are suitably equipped. It's going to be like a huge bazaar, really. There are going to be workshops, there are going to be seminars, there's going to be a lecture series, there's going to be a film series, there are going to be bazaars of one kind or another, there's going to be a lot of work with young people, with adolescents.

MENON: One of the matters of concern that some NGOs have expressed is tha of the security situation in Cairo. As you know, they have a kind of fundamentalist Islamic movement which is against the government and has targeted foreigners. Have you talked about this within your committee, or what do you think?

MILLER: Oh, yes, we have discussed this with the Egyptian authorities, and they are very much concerned and reassuring us. But, you know, there is a body of opinion which feels that if the Conference were held in New York City, the level of the opportunity for violence would be no greater -- no less, sorry -- than it would be in Cairo. But I mustn't pretend that security is not a concern, it is. But the Egyptian authorities assure us that everything possible will be done to make life safe for us while we're there in Cairo.

There are a number of other large conferences which are under way in Egypt all year round and they seem to be managing.

TATE: I was just curious, is there more participation by the NGOs in this Conference than in the previous conferences?

MILLER: Oh, yes, I think so, more and more, every time.

LITTLEJOHNS: At the previous population conferences?

MILLER: Yes, every time there's a population conference you have more and more people, more and more NGOs. And now that we have, as I said earlier, thrown the focus even wider, more and more related organizations are interested in coming.

TATE: How are most of these organizations funded?

MILLER: Many of them are funded through foundations, private foundations, grants of one kind or another; and some of them generate their own funding as well.

MENON: How do you relate to the International Year of the Family, which is also in 1994, and which I understand is a Vatican initiative meant to distribute the focus of this particular concern with population? How do you relate to it at all?

MILLER: I don't know how the Conference is going to relate to it. What I can say is my own knowledge of what's happening in the developing world is that I think that the ICPD is tending to overtake 1994 as the people population event of the year. And it will tend to overshadow --

LITTLEJOHNS: To overshadow the family year.

MILLER: -- it's overshadowing a bit the fact that it's also been declared the Year of the Family. Although in most countries something is happening. I mean there are programs on the ground, all sorts of activities, to celebrate the Year of the Family, but I don't think it has the kind of profile that the International Conference on Population and Development does.

MENON: You know, one of the things that's been of interest to me is that the Vatican, the Catholic Christian position on many population issues is fairly well known. How do the other major religions of the world come in on this?

MILLER: Well, we're going to meet that in Cairo, because in Egypt we will find that the Muslims, their far right is not going to be very much different from the Christian far right. And --

MENON: But Islam itself does not pronounce itself on -- say on abortion.

MILLER: Well, let me not be the one to say, but I think that that is going to be -- they will join in that whole controversial debate. And I think not only Islam and Christians, but a number of other interest groupings as well. The UN is -- the UNFPA, the secretariat for the ICPD is --

LITTLEJOHNS: That's the Fund for Population Activities.

MILLER: Yes. They are hosting -- they're the secretariat for the Conference, for the intergovernmental conference that is, in the way that we are for the forum, the NGO forum, and they are presently hosting a number of roundtable discussions. There's

going to be one, quite soon now, on ethics. And they've covered a number of the major issues.

TATE: I'm curious, many of the programs seem to be aimed at educating women on prevention. Are there any programs aimed at men in prevention of pregnancies or --

MILLER: There are, there are, but not nearly as many, not nearly as many. It's not an easy matter to raise with men. The whole contraceptive industry is geared more to women than it is to men. That is changing.

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, what about all the condoms that are manufactured? They're certainly geared towards men.

MILLER: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. But I mean, there's not as great a choice in the number of devices that are available to men, and we're hoping that that will change as we move into the twenty-first century. But there is, almost in every discussion on reproductive health, a concern that we need to bring boys and men -- particularly boys -- and men more into this discussion in a way that we hardly did before.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mentioned, Ms. Miller, that you were the Minister of Health in Barbados. What's your view about distributing free condoms to teenagers in school? Are you doing that in Barbados?

MILLER: We're not doing that in Barbados. We chose another way of doing it. We chose to educate our young people. Family life education is a very real thing in the Caribbean, timetabled into the curricula of many of the schools, which are mostly government schools, and some private schools as well.

LITTLEJOHNS: So you counsel abstinence rather than prevention, is that it?

MILLER: Yes. I did a very interesting project a few years ago in ten Caribbean countries where I organized youth parliaments. I literally took over the parliament houses, with the permission of the various speakers -- we operate on the Westminster model -- and I put hand-picked teenagers in there and let them behave as though they were the government and they were the opposition. And it was most revealing. It went live on radio and, in some countries, live on television, and it was most revealing. In every single country, there was at least one youth parliamentarian who made this point to us as family planners. They said, you know, "You've introduced us to every other contraceptive device, but you never discuss abstinence with us."

LITTLEJOHNS: The teenagers themselves said that?

MILLER: Yes!

LITTLEJOHNS: Really?

MILLER: When it happened the first time I thought, oh, this young man is being a bit of a wiseguy. But when it happened every time spontaneously, unrehearsed, in all of the other countries, it was clear that this was an unmet need among adolescents that we must address.

MENON: Yes, actually I've come across this coming from teachers who say that adolescents need to be told that there are limits, that they almost demand limits to be set --

MILLER: Yes.

MENON: -- and that this whole adult attitude that they can't constrain themselves is completely wrong.

MILLER: Yes, yes. And the attitude, too, to the provision of contraceptive devices. There's been quite interesting research done in the Caribbean which has proven beyond any peradventure that the provision of contraception to young people does not make them any more promiscuous than they already are. In fact, it makes them far more --

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Miller, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us --

MILLER: -- far more responsible. Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: -- on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been Billie Miller, Chairperson of the NGO Planning Committee for the International Conference on Population and Development. She was interviewed by Bkaskar Menon of the Times of India and Emiko Tate of NHK-Japan Broadcasting Corporation.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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